

“At the Threshold of Life”
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Easter Sunday
April 21, 2019
First Congregational Church of Haddam
Higganum Congregational Church

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”

Tulips. Hyacinth. Snowdrops. Where I grew up in mild California, these flowers are considered “annuals.” Some daffodils will come up again- surprisingly sometimes in the fall!- but the bulbs of these others require refrigeration followed by immediate planting. The ones I ever saw as a child always were from a florist.

When I moved to New England and had my first spring discovery of flowers I had not planted coming right up from the ground, I was enthralled. To think all that beauty and life was there underfoot unseen!

Every seed is like that, I guess, and some particularly so. For her doctorate geobiologist Anne Hope Jahren, author of Lab Girl, tested the seeds of the ubiquitous North American hackberry tree and discovered the hard trees’ hard seeds are identical in mineral makeup to opal. There are billions of such semi-precious gemstones in the ground, with God and the trees casting millions and millions more about every summer.

Not this year so much, but often here in New England, winter challenges those spring flowers. I’m sure you’ve seen them- crocuses shiny with ice, daffodils shaking off snow. I always want to cheer. You can do it!

Life is ever daring to push its way through the soil and through adversity, beauty always seeking to surprise in shadows, like the golden altar cross of burned Notre Dame Cathedral glowing as the smoke still rose.

It's a testament to the relentless way God and God's universe pursue life and hope. But whether we ourselves draw strength from this testimony, whether we believe, is on us. How much evidence do we require that Life is victor over Death, that Hope springs, literally, eternal?

Before you think this sermon is going to be one where the preacher wags her finger and tells you you're bad if you don't have enough faith, let me observe that in our passage from Luke none of the characters "get" the resurrection right off the bat.

The women are the best of the bunch, and they are terrified and have to be reminded that Jesus had spoken of coming back to life.

The majority of the male apostles think it's an idle tale, wishful thinking of the women.

And in our record from Luke, Peter stoops to look into the tomb, but doesn't go in. Doesn't step over that threshold. It's different in John's account which some of us heard this morning at the sunrise service, the other canonical Gospel that describes Peter at the tomb. In John's telling Peter does go into the tomb to examine the graveclothes left behind, but only John, the disciple Jesus "loved," is said to have 'believed.'

Our accounts seem to agree that Peter, always a stand in for the church, for us, spends that early Easter morning making investigations, interested but not ready to commit.

So my friends perhaps the bar for faith this Easter Day isn't overly high. Perhaps all of us, terrified, unsure, and hopeful, are welcome here this morning.

In fact, you know what I'd doubt? I'd doubt any account of the Resurrection in which believing it was easy, in which it didn't come as a shocking surprise. Because even though there is life and beauty all around us, our human experience comes with pain built right in.

The most beloved and well-attended babies still cry. They've exchanged the perfect peace of the womb with its constant temperature and automatic nutrition for the shock of cold air and a periodically empty stomach.

And that's just the beginning. Skinned knees in childhood, social dramas during adolescence, the ups and downs within mature relationships, the inconveniences of even the gentlest aging- these are all to come.

And if we survive and count our blessings through all of them, if we are fortunate to have enough tangible goods to be comfortable and generous, to remain healthy in mind and body, and to know friendship and meaningful work and deep love, we still live with finitude. We are conscious of our own mortality and that of those others we care about. We know grief, from the loss of our first pet to the spouse of decades.

We also witness injustice, and willingly or not, participate in it. We are caught up in the crowds and systems that crucify the innocent; we err, for to do so is human.

The Easter idea that was, and is, so difficult to take in, is that the Love we treasure is not an idle tale, not wishful thinking, not a nice-but-fleeting feeling in the springtime, not meaningless or temporary, but the very nature of the world. That every bit of the suffering and loss we experience, every bit of the destruction and violence and compulsion and greed we know, ***all of it has been overcome***. The tomb is empty! Empty of Death! And crossing its threshold now means entering Resurrection Life! We can go where we have feared to before, trusting that God genuinely is on our side. Not because we have wrestled our failures and doubts to the ground, but because God is ***Love that will not let us go!*** Alleluia!

And lest we imagine that Good News, that Gospel, is true but not for us, not for me because something I've done or thought or said puts me beyond redemption, we have Peter right there. Peter who denied he even knew Jesus three times will be the one on whom Christ builds the church of the faithful.

So let's join Peter today. Let's go home amazed. And when we get home, when we get back to our own Galilee, as we'll hear in the stories in the next few weeks of scripture readings, the Risen One will meet us. He'll speak to our pain and heal us from the inside out. And he will bless us anew with his own Holy Spirit, a Spirit of Courage and Compassion, a Spirit of Peace that passes understanding and Joy in all circumstances.

With that Spirit, the Spirit of Resurrection, there's no telling what can happen.

Two hundred years ago this year, in 1819, *Lilium longiflorum*, the Bermuda or Easter lily, first was brought to England from the Ryukyu islands of southern Japan. They were grown in Bermuda until 1898 when a virus destroyed the industry and most production moved back to Japan where it remained until World War II.

One hundred years ago, in 1919, a wartime USDA employee named Louis Houghton came home to southern Oregon and shared around with friends and neighbors a suitcase full of lily hybrid bulbs from his botanist colleague Dr. David Griffith. Today, 95% of all of commercial Easter Lilies come from seven farms in a small coastal area of Northern California and southern Oregon: something over 14 million lilies per year.

Pictures of the fields of lilies in the region are spectacular, but the farmers go out and break off those flowers by hand soon after they bloom so the what is below the soil can grow. That's what they export. That's what multiplies by division and transplanting and seasons of cool and sun. That's what brings beauty from those seven farms by way of greenhouses to us here: the dry dusty bulbs, the new life wrapped in unlikely-looking packages.

This Easter Sunday, your story may not feel like it's going anywhere at all. But who would have imagined a suitcase full of bulbs would grow into an international near-monopoly bringing beauty to the faithful? Who would have imagined Peter, who hesitated at the threshold of the tomb, would go on to preach and teach and proclaim?

Where, O death, is thy sting? Not here, not at this tomb. Let us step forth joyously to seek the resurrected one where he will be found, among the living. Alleluia and Amen!